

What Presence: Epistemology, Technology, and the Supernatural

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the forms of speech, evaluation, and evidence which surrounded the Spiritualist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and what legacies have continued into our modern cultural and epistemological landscapes. The first chapter ‘Apparition’ details the scope of the thesis, exploring its context and remits. The second chapter ‘Voice’ explores the speech of the mediums themselves, and how these testimonies relate to the concept of *parrhesia*, particularly in the Foucauldian definition. Examined within are questions of the medium as a unified Self or as an amalgamation of Self and Other, as well as the dangers provoked by the medium’s testimony from outside forces—legal, medical, and patriarchal. The third chapter, ‘Spectacle’, focuses on the performance of the séance itself and the ways in which mediums and manifestations were tested by both those attempting to prove their veracity or expose their fraudulence through the photographic image. Considered here are the problematics of empirical evidence with regard to insubstantial phenomena, as well as the advent of new technologies and the advancement of lens-based conceptions of truth. The fourth chapter, ‘Echo’, traces the path of the supernatural forward through technological advancement and uses Derrida’s concept of hauntology to evaluate how the supernatural, and the histories of spiritualism and the séance, shape our theories of reality today. It is concluded by the epilogue ‘Manifestation’ which details how this research and my artistic practice have influenced one another. This thesis contemplates how the supernatural and the epistemological entwine and what truth or truths we may be able to conjure from the dark hubbub of the séance room.

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<<https://tonyoursler.com/the-influence-machine-new-york>>

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“In what ways do spirits speak, if not of themselves in any historical sense of the term, but of the constellation of knowledges that brought men and women to summon them, test them, believe in them, and attempt to define them? Yet the spectres who haunt someone or some time or some place tell us about what mattered then, to them, there.”

Marina Warner

Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century

I. APPARITION

In a darkened room, a gaggle of expectant sitters arrange themselves, jostling for prime position in the inner circle. Last to be seated is a young woman, clad in simple dress, who takes her pre-assigned place at the table left vacant. The murmurs die out, the sitters clasp each other's hands, preparing for a shared experience reliant on each other's trust. The last gas-lamp fades to black, the young woman casts her eyes downward, shifts once, twice, and then opens her mouth and begins to speak in a voice not quite her own...

Spiritualism as a belief system, or a set of belief systems, is quite rare in that it has a relatively definitive starting date. In 1848, two of the three Fox sisters Margaretta (Maggie) and Catherine (Kate), ages 14 and 11 respectively, reported hearing unexplained rapping noises in their upstate New York home, which they attributed to a ghostly figure they named 'Mr Splitfoot', and later to a peddler supposedly murdered in the house named Charles B. Rosna. By 1850, the two sisters were performing public displays of these rappings before audiences in New York and following this the movement which became known as 'spiritualism' flourished on both sides of the Atlantic, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in western Europe.¹ The practice, in various manifestations, principally involved attempts to locate and communicate with the spirits of the dead. From its genesis, spiritualism was wrought with contradictions and critiques, some of which have been proven, some of which remain unexplained to this day.

The intention of this thesis is neither to prove nor disprove the supposed 'reality' of hauntings, spirit guides, or apparitions. Rather, I will consider spiritualism as a phenomena, taking into account its social, political, and technological contexts and the way that it in turn influenced contemporary society, and the way in which its legacy continues to project after-images into today's visual and cultural climate. As Alex Owens writes in her book *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989),

Although believers certainly thought of the spirits as real, reality can only be understood in relative terms. The question, 'Were the spirits real?' assumes a binary

¹ Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among The Spirits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) p1-17

opposition–real (genuine)/non-real (fraud)–and a single trajectory of consensus reality.²

As we shall discover, this conception of a consensus reality is questioned constantly within spiritualism, not just from critics who doubted the veracity of spiritualist practices but within internal circles and between factions. Spiritualism is a wide term, encompassing many forms of belief. Spiritualists could be political radicals, social conservatives, public performers, private sitters, committed Christians, empiricist atheists, ‘true’ believers, self-confessed fraudsters–any combination of these and further. When I use the term ‘spiritualism’, it is important that one remembers that it was not a dogmatic faith in the traditional sense but rather a loose amalgamation of vastly different perspectives and practices. Though ghosts and communication with the dead are concepts which appear throughout different cultures and across time periods, this thesis will consider spiritualism as a distinct phenomenon which occurred in the post-Enlightenment West. It is in this context and with contemporary epistemological frameworks that spiritualism was practiced and evaluated. It is also against these frameworks that spiritualism’s disruptive capabilities can be examined. Spiritualism as an expanded practice shows various antagonistic possibilities against many conceptions of consensus reality. For example, spiritualist practices could challenge both traditional religious rhetoric as well as post-Enlightenment empirical scientific models, often concurrently. These disruptions, as well as the theatrical nature of the practice and the implicit necessity for a suspension of disbelief, make spiritualism intensely relevant to the study of epistemology. Due to their chimeric nature, the practices of spiritualism as described in this thesis come into varying levels of conflict with almost every framework to which one can compare them and as such present a rich seam for epistemological enquiry.

Throughout this thesis, I will occasionally use the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’ in reference to the figure of the medium. This is not to say that mediumship was an exclusively female enterprise, however it is one undoubtedly coded as female and, as we shall see later, one that actively employs and at the same time challenges ‘feminine’ characteristics, as they were considered in Victorian culture. As such, I use these pronouns in an expanded sense of those who are, in the words of Johanna Hedva in their 2016 essay *Sick Woman Theory*, “the un-cared for, the secondary, the oppressed, the non-, the un-, the

² Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, And Spiritualism In Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p24

less-than”.³ As we will see, mediumship’s relations to gender roles and conceptions of ‘the feminine’ are complex, being at once a tool of liberation for the mediums themselves and, as in the case of Louisa Lowe, potentially also evidence used as a tool of oppression by patriarchal forces. As such, I do not wish to reinforce a binary model of gender in my use of female-coded terms, but rather employ such terms with an understanding of ‘woman’ as an expounded category that, within the context of nineteenth and twentieth century spiritualism as well as in today’s context, exists within a patriarchal social and political climate.

Throughout this thesis, we shall look at the nature of ‘truth’ within the séance room. This location is of great importance across spiritualist practices as a place where ghosts were channelled, left traces, and occasionally appeared. Akin to a theatrical stage, there are certain levels of disbelief expected to be suspended within this space, and certain codes of conduct required in the outside world could be challenged within its four walls. The chapter ‘Voice’ examines the modes of speech that could occur in this context, and how, through the performative surrendering of the Self, female mediums could speak with frankness denied to them in much of Victorian society. Though this chapter focuses less on the technological elements which will feature later, nonetheless I feel it important to start with the voices of the mediums themselves. Despite their relatively privileged place within the ritual of the séance, the words and experiences of mediums are not nearly as present in the record as the channeled speech of their Others, or as the reports of the predominantly male scientists and researchers who examined them. Often they appear, as Marina Warner describes, as “the sacrificial victim, with the sitters as the hierophants of the rite”.⁴ This cultural conception of the role of the medium is challenged by the writing of some spiritualists themselves, especially those of Louisa Lowe. Within her writings, we can see the explicit counterings of both contemporary ideas of feminine passivity, as well as a challenge to accepted histories of spiritualism and the power dynamics present in them. It is for this reason I start with their own surviving testimonials, using the Foucauldian paradigm of *parrhesia* to examine the ‘truth’ of their words in an expanded sense.

Furthermore, we will explore mediums that were documented and tested by those trying to prove or disprove the scientific reality of spiritualist practice. In doing so, we will

³ Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory", *Johannahedva.Com*, 2020
 <https://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf> [Accessed 15 November 2021]

⁴ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p305

consider the limits of photographic evidence, and by extension the erosion of trust in the camera as arbiter of visual truth. We will also examine a number of scientists who were committed to spiritualism, and who saw their belief in their cause as part of a wider reaching worldview. I have chosen the case study of spirit photography as a point of contention between differing epistemological frameworks, as well as its wider cultural role in the shifting cultural conceptions of representation and reality. Finally, we will consider the continuing legacies of spiritualist practices as they continue past the heyday of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We start with one of the swan songs of mainstream performative spiritualist practice, the medium Helen Duncan, and use the framework of Jacques Derrida's 'hauntology' to draw us into the installations of artist Tony Oursler, and forward into the present day. Though many artists have employed the supernatural and histories of spiritualism within their practices, Oursler focuses on spiritualism as it relates to ongoing technological advancement and their shared impact on the conceptualisation of memory. Oursler's work engages directly with the increasing presence of mimetic systems within our digital lives, and as such I have chosen his work as a case study in order to further explore what ghosts continue to haunt our omnipresent machines and what, if anything, we might learn from them.

II. VOICE

The question of ‘truth’ within the realm of the séance is one fraught with complications. Whilst there are myriad examples of physical manifestations—ectoplasm, spirit forms, even supposedly tangible full body apparitions—being claimed and later proved fraudulent in the history of spiritualism as a practice, the act of speech by the medium presents its own epistemological quandaries. This chapter examines these acts in the specific context of the séance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with reference to its social and political contexts and the context in which the medium finds herself operating. I will employ the concept of *parrhesia* (truth telling) and the figure of the *parrhesiastes* (truth teller) to explore the modes of speech used by the medium, with particular reference to the Foucauldian definition of these terms in his lecture series *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, given at the University of California at Berkeley in 1983. In the introduction to these lectures, Foucault outlines two key questions by which to evaluate the reliability of a *parrhesiastes*,

First, how is it that we can know whether some particular individual is a truth-teller; and secondly, how is it that the alleged *parrhesiastes* can be certain that what he believes is, in fact, truth.⁵

The figure of the medium problematises both of these questions—firstly in terms of whether a singular self can be seen as speaking a singular truth, and how much that self’s belief in her own pronouncements can be trusted. Whilst, as we will see in the following chapter, physical manifestations can be examined against contemporary metrics of empirical evidence, the act of speech and its relation to truth remains far more elusive. Through surviving attestations given by two mediums, Elizabeth d’Esperance and Louisa Lowe, I will explore the ways in which mediumistic speech can and cannot be considered *parrhesiastic*, with specific reference to Foucault’s five criteria to define *parrhesia* as established in the first of the Berkeley lectures.



Fig. 1 Mme. d’Esperance during a séance, 1909

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discourse And Truth: The Problematization Of Parrhesia*, 1983.

The medium presents a strange paradox to the concept of *parrhesiastes* in her position as the subject of the enounced (the figure that speaks), and therefore by extension as the subject of the enuncium (that which is spoken). Within her speech, it is fundamentally unclear whether she speaks for herself, another, or some hybrid entity. In a trance state, the medium must make herself absent, or at least seem to be absent, in order to speak the words of a supposed Other. This confusion is detailed in the medium Elizabeth d'Esperance's account of a trance state.

Certainly they are my lips that are being kissed. It is my face that is wet with the tears which these good women are shedding so plentifully. Yet how can it be? It is a horrible feeling, this losing hold of one's identity. I long to put one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch some one just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if Anna be I, and I am lost as it were, in her identity. I wonder in an agony of suspense and bewilderment, how long will there be two of us...?⁶

Though d'Esperance's physical manifestations were later found to be fraudulent, the statement demonstrates a stark psychological challenge faced by the medium in her understanding of her own speech. Even d'Esperance herself is unable to fully claim her speech as her own. This, at first glance, seems to directly contradict the Foucauldian definition of who can be considered a *parrhesiastes*. In his first explanation of the criteria necessary to undertake this role, *Parrhesia and Frankness*, Foucault states

In *parrhesia*, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks.⁷

This clarity is conspicuously absent within mediumistic speech as we see how the lines of Self and Other become blurred within the act of 'truth telling' as it occurs in the séance room. The medium is almost always rhetorically, and sometimes literally, speaking through a veil when she makes her announcements. She fails to satisfy the criteria established in Foucault's next set of criteria, *Parrhesia and Truth*,

⁶ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 305.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discourse And Truth: The Problematization Of Parrhesia*, 1983.

The parrhesiastes is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true.⁸

However if we take a wider view of mediumistic speech, we can apply the paradigm of *parrhesia* rather differently. If one considers the limited contexts in which women of the early spiritualist movement were allowed to speak, let alone challenge, their reality, a wider and more complicated picture of the forms in which ‘truth-telling’ occurs is revealed. Moving from the word-by-word veracity to a more holistic approach to mediumistic speech as it functioned in late Victorian society, we can appraise the manner in which it challenged contemporary social mores in terms of acceptable speech.

In *The Darkened Room*, Alex Owens outlines the manner in which mediumistic speech both upheld and subverted Victorian ideals of feminine passivity. Though American spiritualist circles were more readily associated with overt challenges to sexual norms and the sanctity of marriage, the British movement appeared to function more in line with domestic notions of femininity and emphasised the potential of spiritualism as a respectable, socially aspirational practice. Despite this, even the more genteel British strand of spiritualism offered a professional realm in which women could assume a central and commanding role. As Owens notes,

Spiritualist women assumed a voice denied them by orthodox religion at a time when the church was struggling to shore up its traditional position as arbiter of social and moral values; and when medical science shouldered its way into the fray, ready to pronounce upon what constituted acceptable womanhood, they countered with quite different normative criteria—‘abnormal’ states: voices, visions, and trance mediumship.⁹

No case is more indicative of this than that of Louisa Lowe, a medium born in 1820. Though deeply unnerved and even disgusted by the more performative aspects of spiritualism—such as materialisations of departed children to their paying parents—when first introduced to the practice in the late 1860s, Lowe quickly became a convert to passive or automatic writing, seeing it as a method of ‘direct communication’ with the Almighty in tune with her pre-existing religious faith. Lowe even went as far as to claim her automatic

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, And Spiritualism In Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p39



Fig. 2 Medium Louisa Lowe, 1883

writing as channeling Christ himself, decrying the methods of organised religions and their domination of individual believers. In one surviving passage, speaking on what she has gained from her writing practice, Lowe states

it has taught me to cast off the trammels of authority, and let my mind admit new ideas and, according to its powers, grapple fearlessly with every doubt as it arises... above all it has confirmed the lesson taught by my first deceptions and too often overlooked, that man's only sure guide, and legitimate mental master is—CONSCIENCE.¹⁰

It is hard to imagine a statement more in violation of Victorian notions of church authority or, indeed, feminine passivity than this. Furthermore, Lowe's spirit guides were as damning about the authority of her husband as they were about the authority of the church, and she began to confide in friends suspicious of his infidelity bolstered by her spirit communications. Lowe eventually abandoned the family home in 1870. Following this, her husband the Reverend George Lowe employed two medical practitioners to remove Louisa by force from her lodgings and sign affidavits attesting to her insanity, with much reference made to her passive writing and spiritualist beliefs. Louisa challenged the legitimacy of these statements, however she had no legal recourse to her husband's authority, or access to property or funds under her own right, and so was imprisoned in the private Brislington asylum.¹¹

It is prudent at this point to consider the context in which Lowe's imprisonment would take place. It was at this juncture in the 1870s that Jean-Martin Charcot was developing his theory of hysteria as a "unified organic disease", one that was decidedly coded female.¹² Similar to the staging of many séances, Charcot's demonstrations of his patients and their highly theatrical fits or episodes was visually reminiscent of, and were later accused of employing the techniques of, the work of Franz Mesmer in creating

¹⁰ *ibid*, p170-175

¹¹ *ibid*, p175-180

¹² Elaine Showalter, *Hystories* (London: Picador, 1997). p37



Fig. 3 A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière by André Brouillet, 1887

hypnotic and trance states in his patients in the previous century.¹³ As we will discuss later, in the 1870s Charcot would photograph his patients' episodes as both a diagnostic guide and a way of publicly disseminating his work. It was into this climate of distinctly gendered conceptions of medicine and mental illness that Louisa Lowe was sequestered. Unfortunately for Louisa, the implications of her referencing and employing spiritualist practice were vastly different to when similar techniques were employed by Charcot in his clinical instructions.

It was in various asylums over the following eighteen months and her subsequent campaigning around lunacy laws that Louisa Lowe's status as a *parrhesiastes* can be argued. On admission to Brislington, Dr Charles Henry Fox noted that alongside a "sub acute mania", Lowe also demonstrated a "perversion of the moral sentiments", primary among which being a "total absence of that womanly reserve and reticence upon her private affairs and sexual relations with her husband", as well as stating that whilst Lowe was always reasoned and eloquent, her afflictions were of a "form affecting the moral and emotional state more than the intelligence".¹⁴ Here we are able to see Lowe continuing to

¹³ Julien Bogousslavsky, Olivier Walusinski and Denis Veyrunes, "Crime, Hysteria And Belle Époque Hypnotism: The Path Traced By Jean-Martin Charcot And Georges Gilles De La Tourette", *European Neurology*, 62.4 (2009), 193-199 <<https://doi.org/10.1159/000228252>>.

¹⁴ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, And Spiritualism In Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p180

speak the reality of her life and situation despite the fact that this truth telling directly endangered her, as in doing so she extended her imprisonment in the brutal Victorian asylum system. In speaking in this manner, Lowe directly contradicted the modes of acceptable womanhood as defined by the religious, medical, and patriarchal Victorian society.

Here we can consider Lowe in relation to the third and fourth Foucauldian criteria, *Parrhesia and Danger* and *Parrhesia and Criticism*. Though this risk may not always be mortal, taking the ultimate example as death, he explains the former thus

Of course, the threat of death comes from the Other, and thereby requires a relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself.¹⁵

This threat of danger is expounded upon in the following criteria as follows

In *parrhesia* the danger always comes from the fact that the said truth is capable of hurting or angering the interlocutor. *Parrhesia* is thus always a "game" between the one who speaks the truth and the interlocutor.¹⁶

Louisa Lowe fits both of these criteria perfectly. We know that Lowe continued her automatic writing practice within the asylums and remained convinced of its spiritual significance, as well as continuing her unacceptably frank speech. She not only does this in her interactions with the doctors of the asylum, but also in interviews with and letters to the Commissioners of Lunacy where she adamantly contests her supposed madness. In one letter she writes

Do you, of your own knowledge and from personal observation, certify me, at the present time, legally and technically a lunatic? If not, when was I last One? In what day or in what month did I commit my last Insane act?...I DENY that I am mad.¹⁷

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *"Discourse And Truth: The Problematization Of Parrhesia"*, 1983

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, And Spiritualism In Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p190

In this passage, we see not just the threat Lowe faced if she continued her speech, that of her continued imprisonment, but the threat faced by her interlocutors, both doctors and Commissioners. In this excerpt, Lowe brashly challenges not only their diagnoses, but their entire epistemological method directly. Lowe presented an overt threat to the *modus operandi* of the asylum system by demanding detailed evidence of her insanity rather than passive acceptance of its existence. She continued to speak her truth in this manner even when it became clear that her potential freedom was conditional on her submission to her supposed diagnosis. In another letter to the Commissioners, she writes

Gentlemen, I won't submit—I will give no pledge whatever, under a moral thumbscrew. Were I the vilest woman in London—were Spiritualism avowedly and exclusively witchcraft—I have a right to my liberty.¹⁸

Again, Lowe engages in the 'game' between *parrhesiastes* and interlocutor as she turns the tables upon the men who incarcerate her. In this passage she directly casts her captors as brutal and cruel torturers, in stark contrast to enlightened men of the legal and medical establishments as they undoubtedly would have preferred to be seen. Whilst at the time of her imprisonment, Lowe's 'moral perversions' were given as a justification for her detention, here she lays out the moral case for her liberty.

Louisa Lowe was eventually, despite the apathy of the Commissioners of Lunacy and the efforts of her then-doctor Henry Maudsley and her husband to continue her detention, granted a hearing before the Queen's Bench in 1872 and subsequently released. She continued to work in the lunacy reform movement, publishing in the reports of the Lunacy Law Reform Association. She even faced her former doctors Fox, Shapter, Maudsley, and Blandford in an 1877 Select Committee to examine the legality of her previous detentions. Though the recommendations of this Committee ultimately did little to advance lunacy legislation, Lowe continued with her spiritualist practice and urged her contemporaries within the movement to lend their weight to the cause of lunacy reform. She even published a book entitled *The Bastilles Of England, Or, The Lunacy Laws At Work* in 1883 which compiled abuses of the asylum system. Here we can consider Lowe against the fifth and final criteria Foucault sets out in his definition, that of *Parrhesia and Duty*. In Foucault's words this final relation of *parrhesia* in relation to duty is surmised thus

¹⁸ *ibid*, p190-191

The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is free to keep silent. No one forces him to speak; but he feels that it is his duty to do so. In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.¹⁹

In her refusal to submit to charges of insanity and, following her release, her ongoing campaigns to reform lunacy laws, Lowe exemplifies this criteria. Later in her life she even split from the British National Association of Spiritualists (BNAS) when her convictions to non-orthodox expressions of religion and personal liberty were met by other members citing her supposed past as a ‘lunatic’ and manner as a ‘scolding woman’ to discredit her beliefs.²⁰ Lowe took one of these charges, a letter to the publication *Spiritual Notes* by BNAS council member Desmond FitzGerald, to court for libel charges, and was awarded a public apology by FitzGerald. It is clear that no matter the source of accusations against her, Lowe remained committed to her own truth instead of being coerced into silence.

Within the constructed reality of the séance and the wider spiritualist movement, the idea of ‘speaking one’s truth’ is complex and multifaceted. Not only does the concept of ‘truth’ itself sit in paradox, but the idea of a singular self from whom truth might emanate is fundamentally challenged. In the case of Elizabeth d’Esperance, we see how the utterance of truth in a trance state is complicated by the figure from which it emerges. In terms of social transgression, the medium’s channelled speech, for the most part, was not uttered as an overt shout back to power but rather their speech appeared like their materialised phantom counterparts, with uncertain outer boundaries and with no clear origin or destination. However in cases such as that of Louisa Lowe we see the medium as a figure that can be directly compared to Foucault’s invocation of personae who face immense personal danger, imprisonment, or even death as a result of uttering *parrhesiastic* speech. We see that throughout her life and against whatever form of establishment she faced, Louisa Lowe would not yield from her sense of duty either to her own truth and liberty, or from campaigning on behalf of those who faced similar threats.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *"Discourse And Truth: The Problematization Of Parrhesia"*, 1983

²⁰ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, And Spiritualism In Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) p198

III. SPECTACLE

The use of photography within spiritualism is, again, an epistemological field wrought with contradictions. From the first Daguerreotypes invented by Louis Daguerre in 1839, and even earlier with Nicéphore Niépce's heliographs of the 1820s, the capacity of the camera to record truth has been continuously championed as well as challenged. The idea of photography as a neutral observer and recorder of reality was originally espoused, as images were not created with the fallible hand and brain of man but with the mechanical, objective lens and the absence and presence of light. Following Daguerre's invention, the *Gazette de France* noted of this new technology that "as for truth, they surpass everything" however by 1856, less than a decade into spiritualism's history, the physicist and 'father of modern experimental optics' Sir David Brewster is quoted to have said "for the purpose of amusement, the photographer might carry us even into the regions of the supernatural."^{21 22} So early in the history of photography and spiritualism we see the possibility of technology to operate with, rather than without, 'ghosts in the machine'. This chapter will examine the ways in which the photograph was used in both attempts to prove and disprove the 'truth' of spiritualist claims, and in doing so explore the problematics present in trying to evaluate fundamentally insubstantial phenomena through empirical means. In doing so, I will examine two modes of photography associated with spiritualism, the photographs captured within the séance room itself, and the phenomena of 'spirit photography'. Though often similar in appearance, we will come to understand how these two categories perform altogether different functions within the visual culture of spiritualism.

The concurrent rises of photographic technology and spiritualism meant that the former was increasingly employed in what has been called the 'scientification' of spiritualism. In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in London with its stated aim being

to approach these varied problems [paranormal and spiritual phenomena] without prejudice or prepossession of any kind, and in the same spirit of exact and

²¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception Of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p137

²² Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments : Victorian Spiritualism And The Rise Of Modern Media Culture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), p149

unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled science to solve so many problems, once not less obscure nor less hotly debated.²³

From its outset, the SPR was a multidisciplinary organisation—among its founders and early members were the philosopher Henry Sidgwick, the mathematician Eleanor Sidgwick, the physicists William Barrett and Oliver Lodge, the cleric Stainton Moses, the chemist William Crookes, and the psychologist Frederic Myers. As Marina Warner explores in her book *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*, the two guiding frameworks that shaped the Society's research were those of rationalism and representation. Warner writes



Fig. 4 Florence Cook's 'spirit guide' Katie King, 1874

Séance enthusiasts and psychic researchers... presented themselves as objective scientists applying methods of logical deduction, and proudly proclaimed their alertness to tricks and deception on the part of the mediums. In this respect, photography's nineteenth-century status as a truth-telling or indexical instrument was crucial to the growth of belief in spirit phenomena, and acted as the prime means of their credibility—and diffusion.²⁴

Unlike the 'spirit photographs' we will explore later in this chapter, the photographs taken by investigators such as the members of the SPR were not intended to form part of the ritual of the séance itself but rather as evidence of either the medium's abilities or their fraudulence. The physicist William Crookes in particular drew much criticism from many of his scientific contemporaries for his endorsement of the medium

²³ Ivor Grattan-Guinness, *Psychical Research: A Guide To Its History, Principles And Practices: In Celebration Of 100 Years Of The Society For Psychical Research* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1982), p19

²⁴ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p242



Fig. 5 William Crookes alongside Katie King, 1874

Florence Cook and her spirit guide 'Katie King'. In Fig 4 we see Katie King as photographed by Crookes at a séance in Cook's home whilst in Fig 5 we see Crookes himself standing alongside Katie's ghostly figure. Though as mentioned, the absolute veracity of the photographic image was already in question, still the myriad ways in which a photograph could be, consciously or unconsciously, manipulated and warped lead to images that convinced even eminent scientists such as Crookes or Myers. As Warner notes

in black-and-white images taken during a séance, light traces appear phantasmic, conjuring the presence of wraiths, while other substances, the mysterious blobs and streaks the mediums exuded, lose

defining details of their appearance in the murk of the darkened chamber, illuminated only by a red bulb and the sudden dazzling flash of magnesium.²⁵

The very appearance of these forms, their liminality and their intangibility, was exacerbated by the medium of their capture, the early photograph. Though this visual 'transubstantiation', as Warner defines it, seems at first glance to stand in direct contrast to traditional forms of empirical evidence, it is perhaps somewhat because of this that researchers such as Crookes and Myers were willing to put their weight behind it. By the time of his involvement with the SPR, Crookes was already credited with the discovery of thallium and would later go on to invent the eponymous Crookes tube, an experimental cathode ray device, which would be instrumental in the development of another groundbreaking representational technology, the X-ray, by Wilhelm Röntgen in 1895. Alongside his commitment to spiritualism, Crookes was deeply involved in emerging fields of particle physics, investigating phenomena which could never be observable by the

²⁵ *ibid* p243

naked eye. Crookes made a number of somewhat prophetic statements about the future of science and technology, particularly in reference to such fields as radiowave and telephonic technology. He wrote of the future of these fields

Here is unfolded for us a new and astonishing world, one which it is hard to conceive should contain no possibilities of transmitting or receiving intelligence. Rays of light will not pierce through a wall... But the electrical vibrations of a yard or more in wave-length... will easily pierce such mediums...

In some parts of the human brain may lurk an organ capable of transmitting and receiving electrical rays of wave-lengths hitherto undetected by instrumental means. These may be instrumental in transmitting thought from one brain to another.²⁶

The first part of this statement, at a time where digital transmission is omnipresent, seems quaint to modern ears, whilst in the later part we can see an emergence of some of Crookes' more heterodox premonitions and beliefs. Crookes remained so committed to spiritualism that even after Florence Cook was outed as fraudulent in a public controversy, he continued to believe in her work, stating

I have reason to know that the power at work in these phenomena, like Love, laughs at Locksmiths.²⁷

Alongside Crooke's seemingly unshakeable commitment to spiritualist phenomena, the psychologist Frederic Myers took the problems of empiricism in recording these events as evidence of an underlying issue with Cartesian dualism. In a report of the Committee of the SPR in 1894-5, he stated

The pervading unity of this remains incognisable to him save as an indwelling essence, which is the soul of his soul... he has half bridged over the gulf between objective and subjective, by actually learning to see his own thought, his own will... We are projected as images from the unmanifested unity of things.²⁸

²⁶ *ibid* p227-228

²⁷ *ibid* p226

²⁸ *ibid* p243

It is with this expanded viewpoint in mind that we should consider our other example of spiritualist visual culture, the ‘spirit photograph’. Whilst the photography used in séances by members of the SPR and other psychic researchers was supposedly used to evaluate the veracity of spiritual phenomena or its fraudulence, the proponents of spirit photography saw it as evidence in and of itself of the reality of such phenomena. In the introduction to his book *Photography and Spirit*, John Harvey writes of the relationship between belief and rationality as seen through the lens as such

Spirit, unlike any other subject matter that the camera would survey, drew attention to the paradox of photography’s double identity: at one and the same time an instrument for scientific enquiry into the visible world and, conversely, an uncanny, almost magical process able to conjure up the semblance of shadows and, with it, supernatural associations.²⁹

Prior to the advent of photography, spirit forms by their very essence were understood as insubstantial beings. Earlier representations of these forms in paint or print were inherently fallible, through the fact they had to be channeled through the human hand. As we have previously explored, the supposed passivity of the camera was an argument employed by those who believed in the ‘truth’ of spirit photography, alongside the testimony of those present at the image’s capture. Figures which were hitherto ethereal and transitional were suddenly able to be fixed and studied, with a previously unimaginable lack of human interference. For those who believed in them, here were physical manifestations which could be examined empirically. Spirit photographs fulfilled a double role in their eyes, arguably simultaneously objects of faith and scientific evidence of the reality of their beliefs.

Alongside this double role, it is important to consider another facet of spirit photography—its role as a reproducible commodity within the burgeoning photographic market. Widely seen as the inventor of spirit photography is Bostonian engraver William Mumler, who supposedly happened upon the phenomena serendipitously whilst experimenting with photographic chemicals in 1862. Before the decade was out, Mumler stood trial accused of fraud in his production of images. However despite the judge’s belief that fraud had been present, the prosecution failed to offer definitive proof of what method

²⁹ John Harvey, *Photography And Spirit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007) p7



Fig. 6 Various spirit photographs by William Mumler, 1872

was employed and Mumler was dismissed.³⁰ After this trial and the publicity it received, spirit photography enjoyed a boom period and photographers and mediums alike were able to market and sell images to increase their income and their celebrity status. We see in Fig 6 (top left) how Mumler even conjured the ghost of late President Abraham Lincoln in a sitting with his widow Mary. Again we might consider the parallel history of hysteria and the work of Charcot at the Salpêtrière, particularly his photographic studies of hysteric patients which were compiled into the *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876). These images, like spirit photographs and pictures of mediums' feats, were reproduced and sold. This created what could be called a formal iconography of hysteria, and what Elaine Showalter in her book *Hystories* describes as the "reigning 'cultural preconception' of how to act when insane".³¹ Charcot's photographs were supposedly, like the spirit photographs were often purported to be, created in sterile conditions without

³⁰ Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments : Victorian Spiritualism And The Rise Of Modern Media Culture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), p137-138

³¹ Elaine Showalter, *Hystories* (London: Picador, 1997), p36

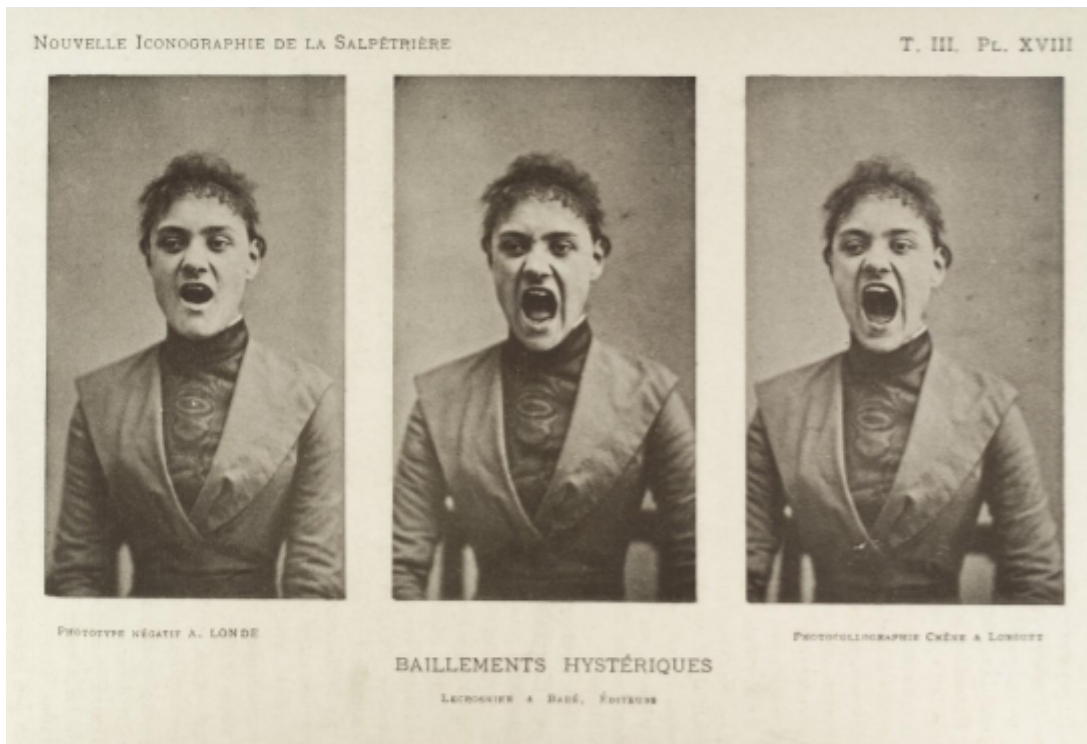


Fig. 7 Image of a hysaeric patient from the Nouvelle Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière. 1890

interference to create an “illusion of a neutral distance, a gaze that does not touch”.³² However, in reality, Charcot employed a number of techniques in the triggering and staging of patients and in the editing of negatives in order to create a highly orchestrated and constructed image.³³ Just as some spiritualists were using the photographic image to argue for the truth of spirits, Charcot was using similar techniques to not just document but redefine the diagnosis of hysteria. Concurrently to Charcot’s publication, an iconography of spiritualism was being created and disseminated, meaning the practice was gaining a presence in visual culture and in the public consciousness, even amongst people who had never themselves attended a séance.

Alongside this burgeoning commercial enterprise came intense criticism from a variety of sources aside from the aforementioned legal challenges. The phenomena was derided by other photographers, with the *Photographic News* printing in 1869 “a trick so easy to enact should not have excited more wonder than the sleight-of-hand effect of the

³² Georges Didi-Huberman and Alisa Hartz, *Invention Of Hysteria* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005). p175

³³ *ibid* p177

commonest street juggler”.³⁴ Critics also included fellow spiritualists, many of whom lost faith in the practice following Mumler’s trial and the admission and conviction of the French photographer Édouard Buguet under a similar charge. Some famous mediums even staged public displays of methods in which forged spirit photographs could be produced, including the very influential English medium Daniel Dunglas Home.

Despite these multifaceted criticisms, many remained steadfast in their belief in spirit photography. In her book *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism And The Rise Of Modern Media Culture*, Simone Natale notes the 1872 case of spiritualist M. Jones who resisted any suggestion that an image which appeared to show his late wife, who had died over a year previously, could be fraudulent. Jones states

Whatever explanation might be given to the above facts by scientists or unconscious cerebration, delusion, psychic force, the result is to me a glory and a happiness which I would not exchange for all the science in the world.³⁵

Here we see a perspective perhaps more aligned with that of Myers noted earlier. Jones is obviously aware of the critiques of the practice, but chooses to believe in a spirit that can exist independently of the body, and can also be proven by technology. The advent of photography brought opportunities for certain strands of the spiritualist movement to prove their epistemological conviction with new forms of evidence. We see however that, like nearly all aspects of spiritualism as a practice, these new forms of evidence almost instantly became as defended as they were derided, even by different factions within the movement itself. It is certain, though, that the phenomenon of spirit photography has definite and long lasting effects on the idea of photography as evidence, and on visual culture as a whole. Natale cites how the research of Jennifers Tucker and Mnookin in detailing the impact of Mumler trial and other debates surrounding spirit photography influenced the reliability afforded to photography in the scientific and legal contexts, as well as in the public understanding of the lens-based image.³⁶ With the development of photography, we see a theme which will continue into the next chapter. New technology, far from settling the debates that continued to hum around spiritualism both from its

³⁴ Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments : Victorian Spiritualism And The Rise Of Modern Media Culture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016) p142

³⁵ *ibid* p144

³⁶ *ibid* p141

adherents and sceptics, served to provide ever more evidential battlegrounds and ever more complex epistemological perplexities.

IV. ECHO

The combination of belief, technology, representation, and memory is again one that sits in uneasy relation and with unclear boundaries. Representations of spirits were abundant, as we have seen, in still photography and the same is true of the moving image. The supernatural as a theme, and superimposition as a technique, were mainstays of the prehistory of cinema, from the smoke-projected phantasmagoria of



Fig 8, Photograph of Kate Johnson with the "Spirit" of her Husband, Robert by Eadweard Muybridge, 1880

Étienne-Gaspard Robertson of the 1790s, to the craze for variously named optical, kinetic, or philosophical toys of the Victorian period. Even Eadweard Muybridge, whose works photographing the movement of horses would become stalwarts of the pre cinematic canon, tried his hand at creating spirit photographs (see Fig 8), albeit always with the caveat that these images were fakes and produced by superimposition or other photographic manipulation. These spectral presences remained a constant in early film works, perhaps the most famous of which being the 'trick films' of stage magician turned actor and director Georges Méliès who variously employed techniques such as double exposure and splicing to commit to film sequences of ghosts and devils as well as established stage magic tricks such as the 'Vanishing Woman'.

From their near-twin births in the mid to late nineteenth century, spiritualism and photography have been entwined with memory—how it is conceived, constructed, and is represented. This trajectory continues with the birth of cinema in the 1890s and early twentieth century. We will examine this aspect of visual culture with reference to Jacques Derrida's concept of 'hauntology'—a *portmanteau* of 'haunting' and 'ontology'—as a means to

understanding modern conceptions of the relationship between image and memory. In his 1993 text *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Derrida explains a central tenet of hauntology to be a fundamentally disjointed temporality. Like the unbodied voices of our second chapter with their unknowable origins and directions, Derrida says of the figure of the ghost that it is “a question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back.”³⁷ Thus far we have seen how it is with this spectral genealogy already in existence that the cinematic image is brought into being. This chapter explores how this repeated recurrence has become symptomatic of modern media culture.

Bearing in mind Derrida’s idea of disjunctures in time, let us move swiftly forward from the 1890s. In *Phantasmagoria*, Marina Warner notes the case of Helen Duncan, the last woman in Great Britain to be tried, convicted, and jailed under the 1753 Witchcraft Act when she was imprisoned in 1944. At Duncan’s séances in the 1920s, she regularly conjured a child called Peggy, who danced and sang in a manner which Louisa Lowe from our second chapter, and no doubt many others, would have found disgusting. Looking at Peggy (Fig 9), we might wonder how anyone could think this was a real child, or even the spirit of one, however Peggy’s mother was convinced she was her own departed daughter. Warner tackles the supposed apparition of Peggy with compassion, noting

That these ghosts could ever have been recognised as a lost loved child by the child’s own mother, reveals the depths of people’s need to reach some peace with the dead.

It also reveals, however, that photography itself has altered our relation to the past and the working of memory: if Peggy’s mother had lived at a time when home videos were standard, it is unlikely that she would have been able to see in Helen Duncan’s puppet the ghost of her daughter.³⁸

We can see clearly in this case the manipulative potential of mediumship, which had been fiercely debated by spiritualists and sceptics alike over the previous seven decades. Warner’s statement also directs us to a new problem, namely how we negotiate the image, still or moving, within our conception of memory. Our contemporary relation to the image of Peggy may be entirely different to that held by Peggy’s mother when seeing

³⁷ Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Specters Of Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p11

³⁸ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p246

the figure in situ in the constructed séance room, and we do not know if Peggy's mother saw such an image in reproduction, let alone how she would have perceived it. In taking a similarly sympathetic approach to Warner in recognising the all too understandable desire of a mother to, in some way, reconnect with her child, we can see the first of Derrida's triumvirate "*three things of the thing*" of hauntology, mourning. Derrida writes of this first state

Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where—and it is *necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*.³⁹



Fig.9 'Peggy' and Helen Duncan, 1933

Here is a constant stumbling block of all our discussion to this point. Throughout the history of spiritualism and the history of the photographic image, the past is not static; it bleeds and leaps forward into the present as we desire to communicate across temporal boundaries. This is a conception of time that is subjective, glitching, and personal. It is altogether different to a traditional linear model, such as the definition given by Julia Kristeva in her 1981 essay *Women's Time* of 'masculine time' as "linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival—in other words, the time of history".⁴⁰ This conception however does not altogether fit with Kristeva's proposed alternative of 'feminine time' as a modality defined by "there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm".⁴¹ This definition is disrupted by a spiritualist conception of the temporal as something that can be transcended in both directions, both in the sense suggested by hauntology of things leaping forward and also in an active reaching back.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Specters Of Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p9

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, "Women's Time", *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), p17

⁴¹ *ibid* p16

Time in this context is something that defies both the models of constant progressive time but also the ‘cyclical or monumental’ definition as posited by Kristeva. Rather, it exists as something that ebbs and flows and, as with so many of spiritualism’s surrounding paradoxes, resists a stable definition.

In his 2009 book *Photography Cinema Memory: The Crystal Image of Time*, drawing on the writings of Gilles Deleuze, Damian Sutton describes the photographic paradox thus

The history of photography is written as a history of the discrete instant: the photograph’s perceived power is balanced on an ability or inability to freeze time. This is what gives photography its extraordinary position in cinema’s history, a position that is as much a relegation as it is a promise.⁴²

In creating an image, one also creates a ghostly apparition, something that is simultaneously absent and present, distant and intimate, dead and alive. Derrida’s ‘specter’ and the disjunction in time his theory of hauntology elucidates remain present long after the cheesecloth and tainted plates of the spirit photography era have left the picture. With the development of analogue photography throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries came a further compression in time, from minutes-long posed exposures that could cost small fortunes to disposable snapshots. In under two centuries, we have seen many generations of images take the place of their ancestors and in turn be replaced. Our spectre returns with each—as we saw the fingerprint of a spirit on a tin-type, so we might see ghostly forms blossom on faded Polaroids, or orbs appear on corrupted JPEG files. Derrida remarks

One cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits (*Kant qui genuit Hegel qui genuit Marx*) except on the condition of language—and the voice, in any case of that which marks the name or takes its place.⁴³

With each new piece of photographic technology claiming greater accuracy than its predecessor, we too see the spectral genealogy continue itself—not only in terms of unplanned or liminal images that may present themselves but also in the reproduction of memory. This constant reproduction continues even further when we enter the age of the

⁴² Damian Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image Of Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p57

⁴³ Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Specters Of Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p9



Fig 10 'The Influence Machine', Tony Oursler, 2000

digital, as one can now take dozens of almost identical images in an instant, most never to be opened again. Before we embark wholeheartedly on the digital turn, we might consider what value is held in memory itself. Sutton continues in a section entitled 'How Do You Rethink Photographic Memory?'

The different memory images that circulate suggest only that memory is there as a process of translation that holds objects together in perception. We should understand memory as the mechanical process, drive, or exchange of energy of the human assemblage. We should understand that it is ongoing and we pick from its movements particular repetitions, rotations, and cycles.⁴⁴

We can consider now Derrida's final 'thing of the thing', that of reproduction, explained as such "the thing works, whether it transforms or transforms itself, poses or decomposes itself: the spirit, the "spirit of the spirit" is *work*".⁴⁵ The work inherent in memory is a constant process, not simply collation but something to be conjured time and time again, with no two apparitions taking the exact same form. Here memory is a constant and evolving bricolage, bringing with it images both directly perceived, those constructed by others, and those formed within its own constructed reality. Far from resolving the supposed dualities which troubled Myers in his research at the Society for

⁴⁴Damian Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image Of Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p210

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida and Peggy Kamuf, *Specters Of Marx* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p9



Figs 11 & 12 'The Influence Machine', Tony Oursler. 2000

Psychical Research, or indeed the paradoxes of the photographic and cinematic images, the current digital age has brought its own problems to compound those pre-existing. The artist Tony Oursler's work has dealt extensively with the histories of spiritualism and phantasmagoria as well as their relations to modern media culture. Oursler's installation 'The Influence Machine' (2000), shown in Madison Square Park, New York and Soho Square, London, draws inspiration from many of the visual and technological phenomena we have mentioned previously including spirit photography, radio technology, and Robertson's Phantasmagoria, as well as wider concepts of mediumistic speech and transference.⁴⁶ The work consisted of a multimedia installation projecting ghostlike figures onto smoke, trees, and sculptural pieces, channeling many overlapping voices of the dead alongside a soundtrack co-created with Tony Conrad. The title for the piece is drawn from a 1919 article (later published in English in 1933) by psychoanalyst Victor Tausk 'On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia' wherein a patient imagines themselves, often by means of magic lantern slides or x-rays, as under a level of control by a quasi-supernatural machine just beyond one reach or just out of one's understanding.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Tony Oursler, "The Influence Machine", *Tony Oursler*, 2021
<https://tonyoursler.com/the-influence-machine-new-york> [Accessed 11 October 2021].

⁴⁷ Victor Tausk, "On The Origin Of The 'Influencing Machine' In Schizophrenia", *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2.3-4 (1933), 519-556
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1933.11925189>.

Speaking of the impulses driving the work, Oursler has said

Telecommunication systems such as the internet are the end product of a long drive toward the current paradox of mind/body separation... This paradox of the discorporative impulse, the shedding of the physical body for the ethereal utopian virtual presence and the promises of ultimate interconnectivity is at once linked to the fear of the void, isolation, and dissociative conditions... Today when the average person finds themselves increasingly engaged with mimetic systems, as they move from telephone to television to internet, and back again, the metaphor of the uncanny technological equation between life and death is all the more relevant.⁴⁸

Though over two decades old now, Oursler's work and words might enlighten our current state of transformation. In the present technological climate, images are able to be perceived, recorded, and disseminated almost instantaneously. We create at least the starting visual materials of our memory assemblages concurrently with reality as we perceive it. The notion of a 'virtual self' is at once very real and by its nature completely intangible. Like the spirit forms and guides channelled by early mediums, it is both of us and outside of us. If we return again to Elizabeth d'Esperance's quotation from our second chapter, perhaps we can understand this double presence in a new form.

I long to put one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch some one just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if Anna be I, and I am lost as it were, in her identity. I wonder in an agony of suspense and bewilderment, how long will there be two of us...?⁴⁹

Speaking with a bodiless voice is not a new phenomenon of our age, as we have discovered at length, however its proliferation reaches far beyond the realm of the séance room. To be in a virtual space, chattering with voices yet entirely bodiless, is now a completely quotidian experience. Therein could lie our third 'thing of things', our 'spirit of the spirit', and our work, of how to recognise and learn to live with not only the hauntings of the past but the perma-haunted space of the internet age. Despite her unveiling as a fraud, perhaps there is still something to be learned from Elizabeth d'Esperance's trance state.

⁴⁸ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p326

⁴⁹ *ibid* p305

V. DISAPPARITION

As we have discovered, there are no simple explanations for the paradoxes presented by spiritualism. Despite countless attempts to unveil its claims as fraud or charlatanism, the cultural impact of its varied practices is manifest and continuous. The forms of speech permitted in the séance room were covert, but this very aspect occasionally allowed for direct questioning of the authority of the Church, of patriarchal society, and by extension of many social codes that underpinned the fabric of Victorian society. In the story of Louisa Lowe, we see a deep conviction not just to her faith and practice, but also to speech and to a life free of oppression and censure. This unwavering belief returns to us once more with William Crookes whose convictions to spiritualism earned him the derision of contemporaries, whilst his other research strands went on to shape the technological systems we use in all aspects of life today. The fallibility of machines and the myth of a neutral system is also present, with the camera's presence in the séance room being used as supposedly irrefutable proof by both sides of the argument for and against empiricist evidence of the paranormal. Continuing to the present day and beyond, the strange afterlives of the spiritualist movement in its many forms can perhaps allow us to consider our own media culture and the disjunctions in time and place we might take as given.

Throughout this thesis, spiritualism and its practice have made uneasy bedfellows with almost every philosophical framework that has been employed to define them. In the examples explored—Foucault's definitions of *parrhesia*, models of empirical visual evidence, Derrida's conception of hauntology, Kristeva's theories of gendered time—spiritualism and its ongoing cultural legacies have resisted any straightforward alignment. How, then, can we understand this phenomena and what may we learn from it? Perhaps, it is in its very multiplicitous and often contradictory nature that spiritualism is most philosophically useful. As we have seen throughout, spiritualism has simultaneously employed and subverted various pre-existing social codes and modes of thought, including but not limited to canonical religion, medicine, law, dualistic thought, and patriarchal hierarchies. In the face of all of these, it has always created new hybrid ways of being and thinking. Employed as an epistemological lens, spiritualism can conceivably serve as a temper for dogmatic thinking or a warning against hubris and further serve as a model of possibility and entanglement.

Though spiritualism and mediumship is today a fringe practice, it is returning from being relegated to the outer edges of cultural thought and the lessons to learn from its 170 year history are manifold. Through engaged reflection and by means of methods such as queer and feminist theories as well as critical perspectives on history and epistemology, we might construct a supernatural epistemology to help manoeuvre the current technological and cultural time. This epistemology has already begun, notably in works such as Timothy Morton's 2013 book *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* and its reflections on illusion and interobjectivity or in Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy and their meditations on how the supernatural confronts and complicates the boundaries of human knowledge. As Karen Beckman states in her book *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism*, "magic provokes critical spectatorship through its self-acknowledged performance of undisclosed activity".⁵⁰ This 'critical spectatorship', at once aware of illusions being performed and in a state of partial surrender to them, might have a purpose as a mode of thought. Furthermore, this perspective might also be fruitful in discussions of quantum phenomena, as the scientific world continues to study states of being which exist liminally and in flux. Spiritualism, not in spite of but because of its fantastic qualities, is a fruitful philosophical lens by which to study a moment in which theories of truth, subjectivity, image, and even matter itself are ephemeral and fluid. By returning to and speaking in dialogue with the complications and contradictions of spiritualism, we might come to further understand our modern spirit-selves as we live through an age in which we occupy embodied and disembodied selves continuously.

⁵⁰ Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, And Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2009) p190

VI. MANIFESTATION

In the course of my research into the topic of spiritualism, many conceptual elements have spoken to me as I have continued my artistic practice. Key amongst these are communication, theatricality, and suspension of disbelief. I designed the exhibition phase of 'What Presence' based around these themes. As in the written element, which I open with a composed 'scene setting' of a séance about to begin, I wanted the exhibition to include a similar physical framing device. For this reason, I planned an 'ante-chamber' space through which the viewer may enter the exhibition and begin to consider the theme of communication. In researching and writing about Louisa Lowe, I was greatly struck by her communications with, across, and in conflict with unseen figures, temporal boundaries, and social strata respectively. This led me to consider what I, as a woman living and producing art in the twenty-first century, might want to say to Lowe if I could find a medium by which to do so. This developed into a sound piece by which two speakers attempted communication with each other. One side consists of selected writings of Lowe which I have converted into Morse code and manipulated almost to the point of incoherence. The other, a prose piece written in a stream of consciousness style not dissimilar to Lowe's automatic writing and manipulated to a slightly lesser extent, is my response to her writings and the story of her life. Morse being a then-new technology posited by many spiritualists and contemporaries as holding potential to facilitate communication with unseen realms, I find this a fitting medium by which to translate both my and Lowe's writings.

Speaking candidly, I find Lowe's writings incredibly moving as a woman trying to find and assert my own voice within my artistic practice. At many points in researching this thesis, I have been struck by accounts of mediums trying to defend their beliefs and visions to those unsympathetic and, in the case of Lowe, even those who would deny her autonomy and freedom. These accounts triggered memories of my own experiences in various contexts—doctors' offices, police and courtrooms, even art school tutorials—of trying to convince those who wielded more power than me that my experiences were real, I wasn't lying, wasn't delusional, wasn't malingering, and that what I was saying held weight. The sound piece that opens 'What Presence' is my attempt at communication with Lowe across spatial and temporal bounds. Though it might appear close to being cacophonous, and indeed is designed in a manner by which it would be near-impossible for the listener to decipher back into recognisable prose, the piece is intended as a offering

of supernatural solidarity across bounds, and as a testament to shared experience and the extreme effort exerted in trying to communicate one's experience and subjective reality.

The main chamber of 'What Presence' explores further the conceptual elements of theatricality and suspension of disbelief. Within this space are three play sets depicting various scenes from a séance, executed in wood and wax. With these I intend to make physical the 'self acknowledged performance' mentioned by Beckman in the previous chapter. With visual reference to historical toy theatres as well as conceptual reference to the play *The Balcony* by Jean Genet, I create a microcosm of the constructed reality of the séance, with its own interior logic and the archetypal characters of the Medium, the Scientist, and the Sceptic, amongst others. In terms of materials, I have chosen to construct the detail of these pieces in wax bas-relief. Wax is a medium I have previously employed for its liminal qualities, as a material that is between states of solid and liquid. It has often been employed in allegories of the boundaries between life and death such as the death mask or the Anatomical Venus, as well as being a material often used in the production of materialisations within the history of spiritualism. As Marina Warner states in *Phantasmagoria*, wax is often associated with deception and illusion, with the very term 'sincere' deriving from 'sine cera' or 'without wax', and has 'paradoxical properties' as it "cheats death; it simulates life; it proves true and false".⁵¹ Like the presence of Acanthus blossoms in the first scene, used in Victorian floriography to symbolise both 'fine art' and 'artifice', my use of wax as a medium of representation is intended to draw attention to the illusion of the play set as an object. At first glance it appears simply constructed and akin to a child's toy, however to be understood as a whole it requires a level of surrender to paradoxes of reality and the fact that one is being deceived. Present also in each set is a reflection of the viewer's gaze—in the voyeuristic onlookers to the supposedly private examination of the medium, in the figure of the cameraman absent from the physical space but reflected in the mirror above the fireplace, and in the faces of the earlier scenes who return as ghostly apparitions in the final scene. Here again I mean to make clear the play set as construction and also to suggest to the viewer their own complicity in said construction. A toy theatre, after all, exists to be interacted with and with these sets I create an active rather than passive engagement, both physically and conceptually, between the artwork and viewer.

⁵¹ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p23

Taking further this idea of active engagement, the final works in ‘What Presence’ are two optical illusion toys—the praxinoscope and the phenakistoscope. Both of these are pre-cinematic devices for creating the illusion of continuous movement and were popular in the late nineteenth century as entertainment. Like the play sets mentioned previously, both rely on mirrors and reflection and the interaction of the viewer as a means to create their effect of presence. In the praxinoscope, I have staged a manifestation of a ghostly presence in the form of double self-portraits with myself playing the role of both veiled medium and apparition. Drawing from the early cinematic examples of cinematographers such as Georges Méliès, I have employed an analogue method for producing these images by means of the emulsion lift technique from Polaroid snapshots. Each double image is made by freeing the emulsion film of the Polaroid image from its frame and suspending it in water, before layering one image atop of another. In conceiving of and creating these images, I have been reflecting on the testimony of Elizabeth d’Esperance and her fractured selves. I experiment in making physical this feeling of disembodiment and confusion, again in a self-acknowledged and performative manner. In the phenakistoscope, I have employed another alternative photographic method, that of the Lumen print technique. In creating these images, I have layered expired photographic paper with cheesecloth, and exposed these to sunlight in order to create a photogram. Similar to my use of wax, I have chosen to use cheesecloth due to its association with spiritualism in the supposed manifestation of ectoplasm. In combining this material with the Lumen technique, I make a record of its absence rather than its presence. Such cameraless photogram techniques can ultimately only show something that was rather than still is, and so all that is left is an ephemeral visual reference to what might once have been. As with the phenakistoscope, this is then mediated through movement and reflection to create an illusion of continuous being, with the resulting animations a construction of wholeness that was never present in reality.

The exhibition phase of ‘What Presence’ has been in continual development alongside the written component and they sit alongside and in dialogue with one another. Rather than research leading to representation in a linear progression, it has been through my practice that I have been able to explore and expound upon the philosophical ideas I have explored hitherto. I have found in the making of this exhibition that there is no simple cause and effect between my theoretical and artistic practices, rather they exist in a continual ebb and flow of concepts, realisations, and manifestations.

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